

BY KEN LAWRENCE

Navassa Island: the original overseas United States possession

NAVASSA, A SMALL ISLAND OFF THE COAST OF HAITI, HAS PLAYED A CENTRAL ROLE IN HISTORIC PRECEDENTS THAT CONTRIBUTED TO THE RISE OF THE UNITED STATES AS A GLOBAL POWER, YET ITS POSTAL HISTORY IS ELUSIVE.

Navassa Island is located in the Caribbean Sea between Jamaica and Haiti, south of Cuba, as shown in the Figure 1 map. Archaeological evidence confirms that it was once inhabited by Taino people indigenous to Haiti. (Tradition holds that Ayiti, said to mean "land of high mountains" in the Taino language, was their name for the island of Hispaniola.)

Figure 2 includes 19th-century drawings of two Taino potsherds collected by Dr. Christopher Gayleard at Navassa that resemble recently photographed sherds in Figure 3 from another Haitian offshore island. The similarity in style is plain to see.

Early (circa A.D. 1200) residents of Navassa would have needed ceramic pots to hold drinking water retained from rainfall, because the island has no other source of fresh water. Even with stored water, it was not congenial to human habitation. By the time Europeans arrived, Navassa had no resident population, but it was a source of edible shellfish and a refuge from rough seas for mariners who sailed among the Antilles and for transient visitors in small boats from nearby Hispaniola.

FIRST EUROPEAN LANDING AND CHRISTENING

In June 1504 on his fourth voyage to the Americas, Christopher Columbus found himself and his crew shipwrecked at Port Santa Gloria (today known as Saint Ann's Bay) on the northern coast of Jamaica without a seawor-



Figure 2. Native Indian pottery sherds numbered V (first sherd in second row) and VII (third in second row) in this drawing are noted as having been found in Navassa. Reproduced from *The Story of the Life of Columbus and the Discovery of Jamaica* by Frank Cundall, published by the Institute of Jamaica in 1894.

thy vessel to take them home to Spain. He dispatched one of his captains, Diego Mendez, to obtain a caravel from Nicolas de Ovando, the Spanish governor of Hispaniola.

In a barter transaction, Mendez had purchased a large canoe from nearby Arawak Indians. According to Washington Irving's 1828 book *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, to adapt the canoe for travel across the open sea, "he put on a false keel and nailed weatherboards along the bow and stern, to prevent the sea from breaking over it." After adding a coat of tar, he "furnished it with a mast and sail."

Loaded with provisions, Mendez departed, accompanied by another Spaniard and six friendly Indians. At the east end

of Jamaica, they were attacked and captured by a band of hostile Indians. Mendez escaped, slipped away by canoe, and returned alone to Columbus.

Determined to succeed, he departed a second time with an armed force that consisted of Bartolomeo Fiesco as captain of a second similarly modified canoe, in a contingent of six Spaniards and 10 Indians. On shore a larger armed band of Spaniards kept pace with them to the east end of the island.

After a three-day wait for clear weather, Mendez and his party "launched forth on the broad bosom of the sea." With no wind to propel the canoe, members of the crew had to take turns rowing, all day and all night. By the second day they had nearly exhausted



Figure 1. This map of the Windward Passage shows the location of Navassa Island between Jamaica and Haiti, south of Cuba. Credit: A Wikimedia map in the public domain.



Figure 3. The Charleston (South Carolina) Museum includes these sherds among its collection of Taino pottery from Ilet a Cabrit (Cabrit Island), Haiti, about 90 miles east of Navassa. Observe their similarity to the Figure 2 sherds from Navassa. Courtesy of the Charleston Museum.

their supply of drinking water. "About mid-day, when their strength was failing them, the commanders produced two small kegs of water, which they had probably reserved in secret for such an extremity. Administering a cooling mouthful occasionally, they enabled the Indians to resume their toils."

The Indians had advised the Spaniards that a small island lay ahead, "about eight leagues distant from Hispaniola. Here they would find water to assuage their thirst, and would be able to take repose." But another day of rowing passed without sighting land. "One of the Indians died of the accumulated sufferings of labor, heat, and raging thirst; others lay gasping at the bottom of the canoes."

Late that second night,

Diego Mendez sat watching the horizon, which was gradually lighting up with those faint rays which precede the rising of the moon. As that planet arose, he perceived it to emerge from behind a dark mass elevated above the level of the ocean. ...

By the dawn of day they sprang on shore, and returned thanks to God for their deliverance. The island was a mere barren mass of rocks, but they found an abundance of rain-water in hollow places. ...

After reposing all day on the island, where they made a grateful repast upon shell-fish gathered along the shore, they set off in the evening for Hispaniola, the mountains of which were distinctly visible, and arrived at Cape Tiburon on the following day, the fourth since their departure from Jamaica.

In his narrative of the Mendez rescue mission, Fernando Columbus, Christopher's young son who accompanied his fa-

ther on the fourth voyage, called the small island Navaza, probably derived from navazo, an Old Spanish word for an empty field where water gathers in puddles, pools and ponds.

Thus christened, Navassa Island (in English) and La Navase (in French) became a dot on maritime charts even as it faded from the historical record. A map titled "Cuba ende lamaica," published in Germany in 1609, shows it as Navaza.

HISPANIOLA HISTORY AND THE HAITIAN CLAIM TO LA NAVASE (NAVASSA ISLAND)

Under the crowns of Castile and Aragon, which did not recognize or respect indigenous people's rights or property, Navassa belonged to the Spanish Empire as a minor part of all the New World lands claimed by Columbus. But it was merely an offshore island of Hispaniola, never settled by Spaniards.

An ironic episode brought calamitous consequences. Bartolome de las Casas, a Dominican friar, was appointed "Protector of the Indians." Appalled by Spanish colonizers' atrocities against the indigenous Caribbean people, he advocated the use of African slaves as laborers, inaugurating the trans-Atlantic trade in human chattels that he later grew to regret.

Spaniards established their colonial seat of power at Santo Domingo, located in the eastern part of Hispaniola. In the early 1600s, French and British settlers occupied the western part. In 1665 King Louis XIV recognized the colony and named it Saint-Domingue. In 1697 Spain recognized French

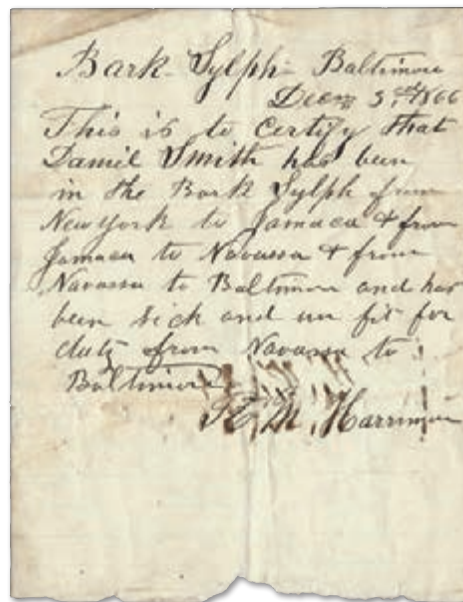


Figure 4. A Dec. 3, 1866, identity paper for Daniel Smith, an African-American seaman, shows that he had served aboard the bark Sylph between New York, Jamaica, Navassa, and Baltimore. He had fallen ill between Navassa and Baltimore, where he was put ashore as unfit for duty.

rule of the western third of Hispaniola and surrounding islands in the Treaty of Ryswick.

Under rule of the lash, which required a constant influx of freshly imported African captives, Saint-Domingue became, in the words of historian Gerald Horne, "not only the richest and most productive colony of the French Empire but of any empire." But largely inspired by the 1789 French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man, beginning in 1791 a slave insurrection led by Francois-Dominique Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines spread and captured power throughout the colony.

In the constitution of 1801, Toussaint declared the permanent abolition of slavery in all of Hispaniola. In his 1938 book *The Black Jacobins*, C.L.R. James wrote: "There is no drama like the drama of history. Toussaint died on April 7th, 1803, and Bonaparte

Continued on page 50



Figure 5. This wood engraving from the March 15, 1868, issue of the French newspaper *L'Univers Illustré* pictures the guano mining, processing and loading complex on Navassa Island. In the foreground is the inlet called Lulu Bay, where crews loaded guano onto small boats, rowed them beyond the surrounding reef, and transferred the cargo to large sailing vessels for shipment to the United States.

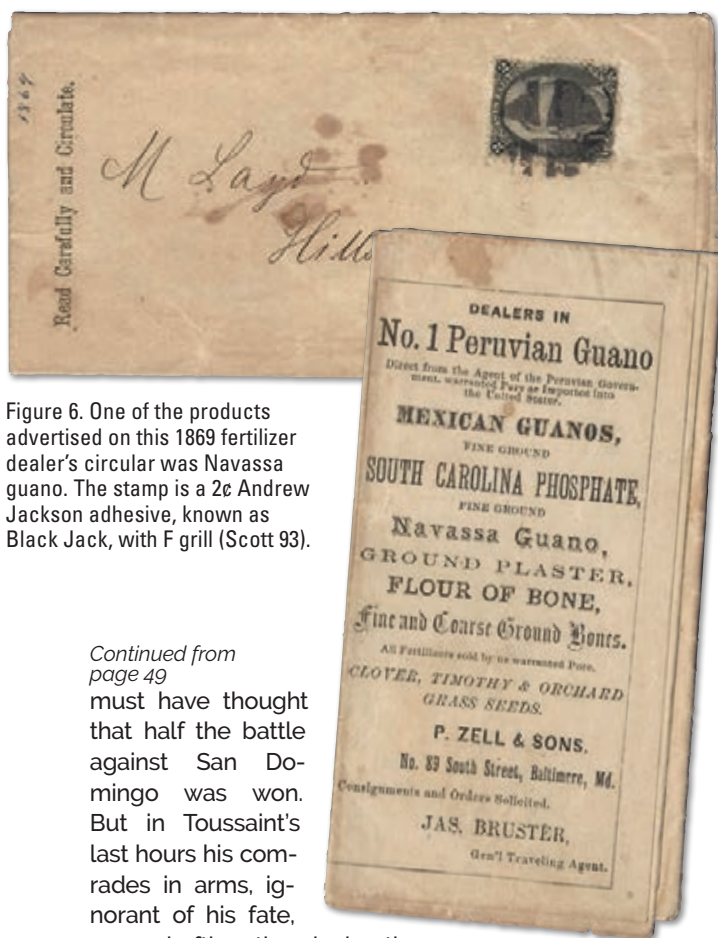


Figure 6. One of the products advertised on this 1869 fertilizer dealer's circular was Navassa guano. The stamp is a 2c Andrew Jackson adhesive, known as Black Jack, with F grill (Scott 93).

Continued from page 49

must have thought that half the battle against San Domingo was won. But in Toussaint's last hours his comrades in arms, ignorant of his fate, were drafting the declaration of independence."

They carried on to victory. "For it," wrote James, "Toussaint, the first and greatest West Indian, paid with his life." The last French troops withdrew in 1803. The costs of military misadventures and the loss of France's most important colony led Napoleon to sell the Louisiana Territory in North America to the United States.

The independent Republic of Haiti was declared in 1804; the former Spanish colony in eastern Hispaniola broke away from Haiti in 1844 and became the Dominican Republic. Each successive Haitian constitution from 1801 to 1867 declared its sovereignty over named and unnamed adjacent islands. The 1874 and subsequent constitutions named La Navasse among those incorporated adjacent islands.

THE UNITED STATES CLAIM TO NAVASSA ISLAND

In early 1856 Sen. William

H. Seward of New York introduced a bill that became the Guano Islands Act, adopted by Congress on Aug. 16 and signed by President Franklin Pierce two days later.

The law provided "That when any citizen or citizens of the United States may have discovered, or shall hereafter discover, a deposit of guano on any island, rock, or key not within the lawful jurisdiction of any other government, and shall take peaceable possession thereof, and occupy the same, said island, rock, or key may, at the discretion of the President of the United States, be considered as appertaining to the United States."

The legal advisor's office of the State Department later wrote, "The use of the term 'appertain' is deft, since it carries no exact meaning and lends itself readily to circumstance and the wishes of those using it."

On Nov. 18, 1857, American sea captain Peter Duncan declared in a sworn statement before a commissioner of the United States Circuit Court for the district of Maryland:

that on the first day of July in the year 1857 he did discover a deposit of guano on an island or key in the Caribbean sea, not within the lawful jurisdiction of any other government, and not occupied by the citizens of any other government, which said island or key is called 'Navassa,' and lies in latitude

18°18' north, longitude 75° west, forty-five miles, or thereabouts, from the island of St. Domingo, and seventy miles, or thereabouts, from the island of Jamaica. The said island of Navassa is about two miles in length, and a mile and a half in width, apparently of volcanic origin, and elevated about three hundred feet above the surface of the sea, presenting a rocky perpendicular cliff or shore on all sides except for a small space to the north. It is covered with small shrubs upon the surface beneath which is a deposit of phosphatic guano, varying in depth from one to six feet, and estimated in quantity one million tons. And said claimant further represents that on the 19th day of September, 1857, he did take peaceable possession of and occupy said island or key of Navassa in the name of the United States, and continues so to occupy the same, and is prepared to furnish satisfactory evidence thereof, and of all others the requisites and facts prescribed by the act of congress in such case made and provided. Wherefore he prays that the said key or island of Navassa may be considered and declared as appertaining to the United States, and that the said claimant may have rights and advantages allowed and secured to him as such discoverer, which are by the act of congress aforesaid provided.

An unpublished manuscript in the Maryland Historical Society collection, "Federal Hill Story" by William J. Kelley,

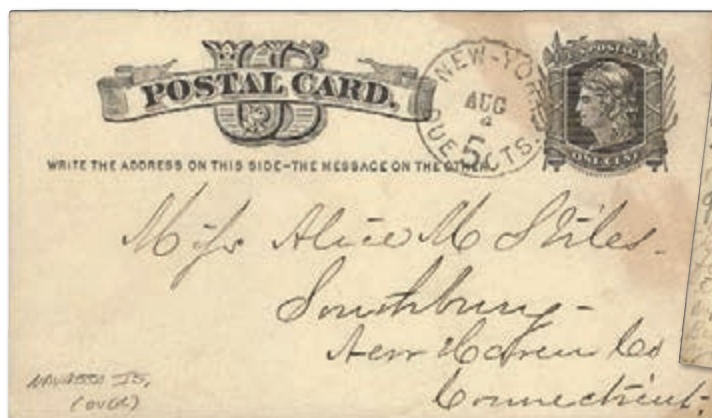


Figure 7. A passenger aboard the southbound Pacific Mail Steamship Co. liner *Colon* posted this 1c Liberty postal card (Scott UX5) "Near La Vasa" (Navassa) in late July 1876 for transport by the northbound Atlas Line steamship *Alps* to Southbury, Conn. Upon arrival Aug. 4 at New York, it was treated as an unpaid ship letter from a foreign country, rated 5c postage due on delivery.





Figure 8. This cover from Navassa Island to Warren, Maine, entered the United States Nov. 1, 1880, at Wilmington, N.C., as a ship letter rated 8¢ postage due on delivery. A pair of 1¢ and two 3¢ Large Numeral postage due stamps (Scott J1 and J3) denote payment collected from the addressee. Courtesy of Scott R. Trepel.

offers a blunt opinion of the transaction that followed:

Captain Duncan, like many another discoverer, evidently thought little of his find, as it seems evident he was not familiar with the value of the natural fertilizing materials which later brought riches to a number of persons. Captain Duncan assigned his rights in the islands for something resembling the Biblical mess of pottage to Captain Edward Kernan Cooper, also a Baltimore mariner ... for the promise of steady employment on one of the latter's sailing vessels. Captain Cooper was, undoubtedly, the more shrewd of the two sailing masters and may have known of the value of bird guano for use in fertilizer for the enrichment of soil.

For the next 30 years, Duncan served as captain of the brig *Romance*, carrying guano, passengers and mail between Navassa; Baltimore; Wilmington, N.C.; New York City; and occasional other ports. Cooper persuaded Gov. Thomas Watkins Ligon to lease "several scores of prisoners confined in the Maryland penitentiary" as laborers, according to Kelley.

The selected prisoners declared bitterly against such unheard of punishment and acted with violent repugnance, claiming their sentences were then greatly aggravated by such labor above all known types of earthly punishments. Desolation on the lonely island, boredom, untended illnesses and pyramiding resentments brought about reckless rebellion among the prison laborers, and bloodshed and death were often concomitants of the cruel punishment. Tropical

storms and hurricanes added to the prisoners' miseries, and following one severe storm forty of the unfortunates were found dead.

On Dec. 8, 1859, to forestall a Haitian attempt to take possession of Navassa, U.S. Secretary of State Lewis Cass issued this proclamation:

Know ye that Peter Duncan, a citizen of the United States, has filed in this department the required notice of the discovery of guano on and of the occupation of the island of Navassa, in the Caribbean sea, in the name of the United States of America, the same being in north latitude eighteen degrees and ten minutes, and in longitude seventy-five degrees west; and that Edward K. Cooper, also a citizen of the United States, and the assignee of the said Peter Duncan, has entered into sufficient bonds under and according to the provisions of the act of the congress of the United States passed on the eighteenth day of August, in the year eighteen hundred and fifty-six; wherefore the said Edward K. Cooper is entitled, in respect to the guano on the said island, to all the privileges and advantages intended by that act to be secured to citizens of the United States; provided always, that the said Edward K. Cooper shall abide by the conditions and requirements imposed by the act of congress aforesaid.

Duncan and Cooper's claim was the third to be filed under the Guano Act, not the first, but it was the first to be certified by the secretary of state acting on behalf of the president, completing the process man-



Figure 9. This 5¢ Zachary Taylor stamped envelope (Scott U177) from Navassa Island to Mt. Sterling, Ky., arrived at Baltimore Dec. 19, 1884, was backstamped Dec. 24 at Covington, Ky., and was struck Jan. 24, 1885, with the ADVERTISED MOUNT STERLING, KY. circular date stamp. It was rated 3¢ postage due, but the 2¢ Large Numeral postage due stamp (Scott J16) indicates that lesser amount was paid by the recipient.



Figure 10. This cover from Navassa to Richmond, Ky., entered the United States Aug. 12, 1888, at Milford, Conn. A backstamp shows that it arrived Aug. 14 at Richmond. It is a prepaid ship letter, with the correct rate met by a 4¢ Andrew Jackson stamp (Scott 211).

dated by the act, and Navassa has remained under United States jurisdiction ever since. Navassa Island is thus the original overseas possession of the United States, held for the longest continuous period of time.

(American Guano Co. had filed claims for Jarvis Island and Baker Island in the Pacific Ocean on Oct. 28, 1856, but the secretary of state did not certify them until March 2, 1861. The company abandoned its claims to those islands in 1879 and 1886, respectively. For periods of time, they were subsequently administered by Great Britain. The United States regained possession of both islands in 1936 and still retains them.)

In his 1956 book *Advance Agents of American Destiny*, diplomatic historian Roy F. Nichols wrote, "In this humble fashion, the American nation took its first step into the path of imperialism; Navassa, a guano island, was the first noncontiguous territory to be announced formally as attached to the republic."

HAITIAN PROTEST OF THE AMERICAN CLAIM TO NAVASSA

Cass should not have certified the claim to Navassa.

Continued on page 52

Continued from page 51

Parties to the procedure understood that the island was located within the coastal waters of Haiti, visible from the Haitian mainland and frequently visited by Haitian fishermen who considered it part of their country.

But those were the very reasons why Cass backed the Navassa claim with a formal pledge of official U.S. government support in 1859, while he neglected previously filed claims to remote Jarvis and Baker islands in the Pacific Ocean.

The United States did not recognize the government of Haiti. American slave owners, their supporters and their representatives in Washington, D.C. — including President James Buchanan — regarded the example of a victorious slave revolution and emancipation on a nearby Caribbean island as an existential threat to their way of life.

While slaveholders worried that their slaves might rise up against them as the Saint-Domingue slaves had done, many American politicians and journalists advocated the conquest and annexation of all the Caribbean islands, especially Hispaniola, as a logical course to extend American imperial power.

One was James Gordon Bennett, editor of the *New York Herald*, the most popular daily newspaper in America with the largest circulation. In the April 10, 1850, issue he had advocated a plan "to annex Hayti, before Cuba." He wrote that a war in pursuit of that aim "would be a source of fun and amusement, ending in something good for the reduction of the island to the laws of order and civilization. ... St. Domingo will be a State in a year, if our cabinet will but authorize white volunteers to make slaves of every negro they can catch when they reach Hayti."

European observers warily viewed the Navassa claim as a gambit toward that goal. The June 26, 1858, *Baltimore Daily Exchange* summarized but scoffed at their uneasi-



Figure 12. This cover from Navassa to Richmond, Ky., entered the United States July 16, 1888, at Baltimore and was backstamped July 18 at Richmond. The 2c George Washington stamp paid only the domestic letter rate; to make up the rest of the ship letter rate, 2c more was collected from the recipient, denoted by the pair of 1c postage due stamps. Image copied from the January 1943 *American Philatelist*.

ness: "The local advantages of Navassa, for such a purpose, have been fully discussed and gravely dwelt on — its position in the South-West entrance of the Windward Passage, and its convenient proximity to all the coveted islands, which are to be gathered, one day, like fishes from the sea, into the mighty net of our manifest destiny."

The Haitian government countered those threats from the United States by maneuvering diplomatically among the European powers who stood to see their hold over their own Caribbean colonies weakened and lost if they failed to thwart American plots against Haiti.

From 1849 to 1859, Haiti was ruled by Faustin Soulouque, its last head of state who had been born a slave and had been a soldier in the revolution. He had enlisted as a private and eventually rose to the rank of general. In 1852 he was crowned Emperor Faustin I. He was acutely aware that the Buchanan administration and American press regarded him and his country with contempt.

Upon learning in March 1858 that Americans had occupied Navassa, Soulouque and his cabinet planned their response. They dispatched two naval

ships commanded by senior officers to investigate the situation. Leaders of the delegation were ordered to go ashore, to interrogate any foreigners as to their purpose, to forbid them to exploit the island's resources without first obtaining permission from the Haitian government, and to order them to leave. They were to avoid using force unless they were physically attacked by the foreigners.

The expedition landed May 21 at Navassa. John L. Frazer, the American in charge of the guano mine, told the Haitians he had established it Sept. 7, 1857. He explained Duncan and Cooper's claim under the authority conferred by the Guano Act. His staff consisted of 45 workers from Baltimore — free men of color — supervised by four white men. To date they had shipped 2,990 tons of guano to Baltimore. Frazer pledged to cease operations from May 25 until he received further instructions from his superiors in the United States. He signed a certificate to that effect.

In the absence of diplomatic relations with the United States, the Haitian government opened negotiations with British representatives who expressed interest in a guano concession, evidently a ruse on



Figure 11. This cover from Navassa to Wilmington, Del., entered the United States Dec. 22, 1888, at Baltimore, and was backstamped that same day at Wilmington. It is an unpaid ship letter, with the correct amount collected from the recipient, denoted by a pair of 2c postage due stamps canceled at Wilmington, identified by the Philatelic Foundation as Scott J2.



behalf of the Americans. Meanwhile President Buchanan had ordered the U.S. Navy to send a warship to Haiti to restore the Navassa guano operation.

Thomas Turner, commander of the sloop of war *USS Saratoga*, went first to Port au Prince "to demonstrate the power and intention of the United States," and then to Navassa, arriving Aug. 7. He notified Frazer that the U.S. government would protect his guano operation.

In light of Turner's show of force, the Haitian government instructed its commercial agent in the United States, B.C. Clark, to protest. State Department representatives replied that the guano claimants had exhibited "proofs which were deemed sufficient that the island was deserted and abandoned," to refute Haiti's claim, then ignored Clark's subsequent letters.

Soulouque wrote to Louis Dufrene, his foreign minister: "The Navassa affair gets more complicated each day because of the misunderstanding and bad faith of foreign governments. By my conviction I remain steadfast. I know that you approve. By every means in our power we must safeguard the integrity of our national territory."

In an anonymous collector's privately held document not published until 1956, an advisor to Soulouque wrote to him candidly: "Even though the law is on our side in this affair, justice and the legitimacy of our cause will triumph only when certain barriers in the United States are broken down. Even

after those fall, we should not believe their promises until they no longer attach economic importance to Navassa."

In January 1860 the United States confiscated the British brig *Laurel* for engaging in "coasting trade" — shipping guano from Navassa to the United States — on grounds that only U.S.-flagged vessels could transport merchandise between ports of the United States. British minister Richard Lyons protested. Treasury Secretary Howell Cobb released the vessel after determining that there had been no criminal intent.

NAVASSA ISLAND DURING THE U.S. CIVIL WAR AND AFTER

The United States recognized Haiti on July 12, 1862, when President Abraham Lincoln appointed Benjamin F. Whidden to serve as U.S. commissioner and consul-general. Whidden presented his credential to the Republic of Haiti government on Oct. 1, 1862.

President Fabre-Nicolas Geffrard, who had orchestrated a coup d'etat that deposed Soulouque, enjoyed good relations with prominent U.S. abolitionists. He encouraged African-Americans to immigrate to Haiti. He had no incentive to pursue the Navassa claim.

Navassa became a rendezvous point for Union Navy ships searching for Confederate privateers and enforcing the blockade of Southern ports. Mining guano continued at a reduced level. Congress suspended the Guano Act provi-

sion that forbade sales of guano mined on U.S. islands to be sold in foreign markets, to allow the fertilizer companies to remain in business after they had lost access to customers in the seceded states of the Confederacy.

In 1864 Cooper sold his Navassa claim to the Navassa Phosphate Co. of New York City, which ended the use of convict labor and increased production. The Jan. 15, 1865, *Baltimore Sun* reported,

The association known as the Navassa Phosphate Company has again dispatched the fine brig *Romance* to the guano islands. On the present voyage she carries out fifty five men, who, when they reach the island, will give the company a working force of over one hundred men.

The new owners continued to employ Duncan as captain of *Romance* and Cooper as captain of his brig *Abbotsford*. They also significantly enlarged the guano fleet and delivered loads to additional Atlantic coast ports. My earliest Navassa document, pictured in Figure 4, dated Dec. 3, 1866, is signed by R.M. Harriman, captain of the bark *Sylph*, another ship under contract to the firm.

It is the identity paper of an African-American seaman named Daniel Smith, who had served on the *Sylph* from New York to Jamaica to Navassa to Baltimore. Harriman put him ashore at Baltimore because he was too ill for the trip north from Baltimore to Boston, which saved Smith's life.

Sylph and its entire crew were lost in a gale off the Massachusetts coast. A Dec. 29 wire story from Holmes Hole reported,

A carved work of arched board, which came ashore at Lambert's cove, yesterday, had the letters 'Sylph' cut in the center. There also came ashore a sharp stern boat painted black, with trunks, rigging, sails, deck, beams, a part of the house, etc.

Figure 5 shows the island in 1868 after Navassa Phosphate Co. expanded its operations, meeting the challenge of loading guano at Lulu Bay. In an 1891 report to the company, geologist Edward V. D'Inivilliers wrote, "The name is a misnomer, as there

Continued on page 54

Figure 13. This cover, endorsed *S/S Andes* via Navassa — New York — San Francisco, was posted Aug. 26, 1891, at Jacmel, Haiti. Backstamps show that it transited New York City Sept. 6 and San Francisco Sept. 12 en route to Noumea, New Caledonia in the South Pacific. The 1-centime, 2c and 7c Coat of Arms stamps (Haiti Scott 26, 27 and 30) paid the 10c single international letter postage rate.



Figure 14. A Navassa Guano Co. advertising card from the 1880s, distributed by an Augusta, Ga., cotton factor, is a relic of the era when guano from Navassa Island brought wealth and prosperity to Southern agriculture.

Continued from page 53

is no bay whatsoever, the sea beating continuously against a 60-foot cliff, and gradually undercutting it."

A Feb. 12, 1869, Treasury Department circular notified collectors of customs that an appended list of islands had been declared by the president as appertaining to the United States, "and, as a consequence thereof, brought under the laws regulating the coasting trade." Navassa was included on the list.

An 1869 advertising circular from a Baltimore fertilizer merchant, illustrated in Figure 6, includes Navassa guano on the back side.

MAIL TRANSPORT TO AND FROM NAVASSA ISLAND

In 1872 and 1873 Haiti renewed its claim to Navassa. Once again the U.S. State Department rejected Haiti's legal argument and refused to consider submitting the dispute to a neutral party for arbitration. But in one respect Haiti benefited from the U.S. presence. Frequent ship traffic at Navassa reduced the transit time for letters between the two countries.

The Haiti handbook published by the Bureau of American Republics explained what amounted to a relay system for mail with Navassa as the hub:

The Atlas Steamship Company, who have a fleet of commodious iron and steel steamers, all built by the best shipbuilders in Scotland especially for this service of plying between New York, the West Indies, and the Spanish Main ... dispatch a steamer every week for Haitian ports, alternating between those of the north and those of the south of the Republic. ... The outward steamers which touch

at the northern ports take the mails there for New York, leaving them at Navassa and passing on to Savannah, Carthage, and Port Limon, and then the next steamer which comes, returning from these later ports, takes the mails up at Navassa, bringing them directly to New York. By this route it takes just ten days for letters from Port au Prince to reach New York. It has proved to be an entirely safe and reliable mail service. The homeward-bound steamers of this line do not touch at Port au Prince or any other place in Haiti.

Atlas Line ships were not the only ones that called at Navassa to deposit and collect mail. Figure 7 shows a postal card, evidently self-addressed by the recipient, on which a passenger aboard the southbound Pacific Mail Steamship Co. liner *Colon*, en route from New York to Aspinwall, Panama, wrote to friends in Southbury, Conn., about his voyage.

He dated the card July 21 (1876) "Near La Vasa."

"I am feeling as well as one could expect on a rough ocean sailing and the weather warmer than I ever remember," he wrote.

The Atlas Line steamship *Alps* collected the card at Navassa on its northbound trip to New York. Upon arrival at New York, it was struck with the NEW-YORK AUG 4 DUE 5 CTS. postmark. That was the rate for a ship letter posted on the high seas or from a foreign country. It is unclear whether the 1¢ postal card postage

would have been credited, or whether the due amount was actually collected. It is the earliest postal item I have recorded from Navassa, but I found a Feb. 19, 1876, *Boston Post* article that alluded to the established mail pickup there.

INTERPRETING POSTAL RATES ON LETTERS FROM NAVASSA

There was no mention of Navassa in the 1873 edition of *Postal Laws and Regulations of the United States*, nor in any earlier one, but the 1879 PL&R listed Navassa, W.I. (West Indies) in the "Table giving details of mails respecting exchanges of mails from the United States, &c." both New York and Boston were listed as "United States exchange offices which make up the mails," with direct but irregular dispatch.

It seems safe therefore to conclude from these various strands of documentation that direct mail service via New York and Baltimore to Navassa Island, and incoming mail direct from Navassa to American ports on the Atlantic coast, and via Navassa from other Caribbean origins, notably from Haiti, had been established some time after 1873 and by early 1876.

By 1880 as many as four ships per day were arriving at American ports from Navassa, yet collectors have reported only a handful of 1880s covers that originated there. They are truly rare in the strictest meaning of the word.

The earliest, pictured in Figure 8, is owned by Scott R. Trepel, president of Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries. It first appeared in the November 2016 issue of *Chronicle of the Classic U.S. Postal Issues*, the quarterly journal of the United States Philatelic Classics Society, as a problem cover whose rate needed to be explained.

On Dec. 31 on Richard Frajola's board for philatelists, Trepel named it his favorite

Figure 15. By the time the Navassa Guano Co. mailed this cover in 1914, the word guano in its name was a misnomer, replaced by domestic sources of phosphate. Guano mining on American islands had ended in 1898. The 1¢ Vasco Nunez de Balboa stamp (Scott 397) paid the third-class rate for up to 2 ounces of printed matter.

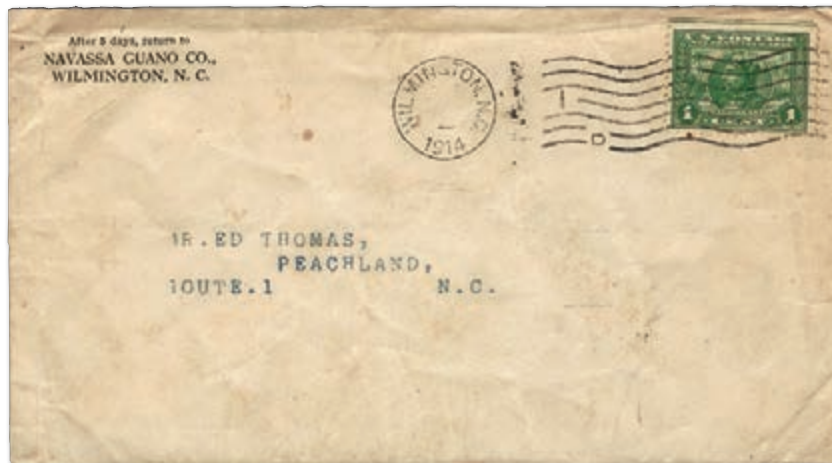




Figure 16. A U.S. Coast Guard schooner wedged against the Navassa shore at Lulu Bay brought building supplies in 1916 for the construction of a lighthouse. U.S. Coast Guard photo courtesy of the National Archives.

acquisition of 2016, acquired from British postal history dealer Brian Moorhouse. In the February 2017 *Chronicle*, Trepel revealed the content of the enclosed letter:

Navassa Island West Indies
Oct. 6, 1880
Mrs. John Cutting
Warren, Maine, USA

Dear Aunt Lucinda,

I will address you a few lines to let you know of my whereabouts. I hope this will find you well and also your Husband. I am loading here with Guano for Baltimore and will sail in a day or two. This is a very lonesome place. Only 18 white men and 230 Negroes is all the people that is here. Not a woman to be seen on the Island. I came here from Jamaica. I no doubt you have heard of the great Hurricane there on the 18th of August, I was in it. All the shipping was lost but another Barque and mine. I had a life jacket on all night expecting every moment that my ship would be on the rocks. I stood on deck all night in the storm and at times the Sea was breaking all over us. I tell you I was a glad boy when morning came and the storm was over and all aboard were safe. ... I have to send this letter as a ship letter and cannot pay any postage here for there is no Post Office and the only way to send a letter is by passing vessel. ...

C.A. Pascal

Pascal's bark *Rosetta McNeil*, loaded with guano, arrived at Baltimore Nov. 5, four days after his letter to his aunt was postmarked at the Wilmington, N.C., post office. The ship had survived one of the worst hurricanes in Jamaican history but was lost at sea two years later.

The problem was to explain the postal rate. Year-dated as

1880 by the enclosure, when the domestic letter rate was 3¢ per half ounce, the ship letter rate was 6¢ (double the domestic letter rate). Why was 8¢ postage due charged and paid?

Trepel and postal historians James Baird, Tony Crumbley and Richard Winter guessed that the post offices at Wilmington and Warren had erroneously added the 2¢ fee that was owed to the ship captain, which was included in the ship letter rate. Patricia Stilwell Walker identified the advertising inscription on the envelope as "Sydney D. Jenkins, Ship Broker, Commission Exporter & Co., Cardiff."

More than 26 years earlier, Ohio collector Scott Gallagher published in the May 1990 *Chronicle* the postal stationery entire from Navassa to Mt.

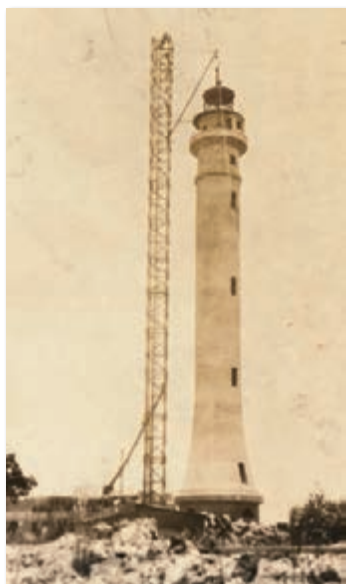


Figure 17. By 1918 the Navassa lighthouse was nearing completion. U.S. Coast Guard photo courtesy of the National Archives.

Sterling, Ky., pictured here in Figure 9, shortly after he had acquired it from California postal history dealer Stanley Piller. This one, too, needed to have its rate explained.

Postal markings show that it had arrived at Baltimore Dec. 19, 1884, had transited Covington, Ky., Dec. 24, and was advertised Jan. 24, 1885, at Mt. Sterling. Somewhere along the way, it was rated 3¢ postage due, but one infers from the tied 2¢ postage due stamps that only that amount was collected from the recipient.

In the four years since Trepel's hurricane letter had been mailed, the domestic letter rate had been reduced to 2¢ per half ounce, effective Oct. 1, 1883. (It would be further reduced to 2¢ per ounce on July 1, 1885.) Postage due experts Warren Bower and George Arfken answered in the August 1990 *Chronicle* that it was probably overweight (more than a half ounce, up to 1 ounce) which, as a ship letter, required 8¢ postage, 3¢ more than the value of the envelope stamp. They suggested that the Mt. Sterling post office had made a simple mistake in applying a 2¢ postage due adhesive.

My opinion, based on the appearance that someone attempted to erase the "Due 3¢" shortpaid endorsement, is that the Mt. Sterling postmaster interpreted it as a foreign letter prepaid at the 5¢ per half ounce letter rate, but wrongly believed that the recipient had to pay the 2¢ ship fee. (There was no fee for an advertised letter, either.)

To my knowledge, this is the earliest mailpiece struck with the red two-line SHIP LETTER/NAVASSA ISLAND, W.I. endorsement. There must have been enough mail to justify manufacturing the postmarking device, but today examples are rare.

Another aspect that interests me is that the sender, George Washington Tipton, was then superintendent of the guano mining station at Navassa, writing to his elderly uncle, Ninus Preston Tipton, probably a birthday or Christmas greeting. (N.P. Tipton was born Dec. 2, 1809.) From Gallagher's estate, the cover went into Florida collector Jon Krupnick's collection, and from Krupnick's into mine, along with other ex-Gallagher, ex-Krupnick covers discussed next.

GETTING THE SHIP LETTER RATE RIGHT ON MAIL FROM NAVASSA

With the 1885 domestic letter rate reduction to 2¢ per ounce, the ship letter rate became 4¢ per ounce. The Figure 10 cover reflects a prepaid example of that usage. It was probably brought to the United States from Navassa on Duncan's bark *Romance*, but by mistake missed the mail dispatched July 16, 1888, at Baltimore, so it was deposited at the Milford, Conn., post office Aug. 12 en route to the Aug. 19 arrival of *Romance* at New York City.

George Tipton sent this one to his brother French Tipton at Richmond, Ky. A backstamp shows that it arrived Aug. 14. French Tipton edited and published the Richmond *Climax* daily newspaper. The Aug. 15 issue ran this snippet:

"Capt. Geo. W. Tipton, who has been sojourning on the Island of Navassa, West Indies, for a number of years, will reach home in September, and remain here permanently.

Continued on page 56



Figure 18. This QSL postcard from Navassa, canceled May 21, 1929, at the U.S. Naval Station, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, is a rare example of mail from the island. The 1c Benjamin Franklin stamp (Scott 552) paid the domestic postcard rate. Image courtesy of the Ham Galley website collection.

Continued from page 55

He recently shipped a \$12,000 cargo of phosphates to England." From this we learn the news that the cover had brought. As events transpired, Tipton returned to Navassa and resumed his position shortly after a brief trip home to Kentucky.

(His title "captain" reflected Tipton's service in John Hunt Morgan's Confederate cavalry regiment. He was captured in Ohio during Morgan's July 1863 raid and was held prisoner at Camp Douglas in Chicago until the end of the war.)

The Figure 11 cover went as an unpaid ship letter from Navassa, aboard Duncan's bark *Romance* to Baltimore, where it entered the mail Dec. 22, 1888. It arrived that same day at Wilmington, Del., where 4¢ postage due was collected from the addressee. Thomas N. Foster, the Navassa Phosphate Co. bookkeeper at the guano mine, sent it to his mother, probably with a Christmas greeting enclosed.

In an article titled "The Mystery of Navassa Island" in the Philatelic Foundation's 1988 book *Opinions V*, Gallagher recounted his ultimately satisfying adventure, assisted by postal history researcher Richard B. Graham, to have the two covers certified as genuine. They are the only Navassa covers in the foundation's database.

The prepaid cover made its philatelic market debut as the last lot in Samuel C. Page's March 13-14, 1959, sale of selected covers from the Harold W. Stark estate, which

also included stampless covers consigned by Stanley B. Ashbrook. In *Special Service*, Ashbrook's privately circulated newsletter for his elite clientele, he described Ann Arbor, Mich., collector Stark as "a keen student of postal markings." In the 1980s, postal history dealer Frajola found the cover in a collection he had purchased.

The earliest record I found for the unpaid cover was as lot 755 in Earl P.L. Apfelbaum's Sept. 14-15, 1983, auction of U.S. stamps and covers. The buyer was postal history dealer Richard J. Micchelli. Micchelli also bought the prepaid Navassa ship cover from Frajola and sold both to Gallagher.

Philatelic literature records one more cover with the red Navassa postal marking. Its current location, if it still exists, has not been made public. Figure 12 shows how it appeared when Ashbrook illustrated it in the January 1943 *American Philatelist*, credited to Vernon L. Ardiffe, who owned it.

This cover brought another letter from George French at Navassa to his brother French Tipton at Richmond, Ky. This one was prepaid 2¢, half the ship letter rate, with the balance collected as postage due. It arrived at Baltimore July 16, 1888, on the bark *Romance*. The cover was first reported in Harry M. Konwiser's column, "United States Shipmarks," in the February 1941 issue of *Postal Markings*. Ardiffe described it in a January-February 1946 *Seaposter* article titled "Ship Letter — Navassa Island, W.I."

The Sept. 25, 1889, issue of the Richmond *Climax* reported:

George W. Tipton died on the Island of Navassa, West Indies, of typhoid fever on Wednesday, September 4th, 1889, aged 48 years. ... Geo. W. Tipton had for eight years been Superintendent of the Navassa Phosphate Company, and Provisional Governor of the island. He made and enforced the local laws at will, and had more authority

than was possible for any ruler in a Republican form of Government.

Tipton's death marked a fateful turn in the history of Navassa, which has continued to influence world events ever since. Jimmy M. Skaggs wrote in his 1994 book *The Great Guano Rush*:

However questionable it might have been for corporate rules to carry the weight of statutes, on Navassa island there was no mechanism for appeal. Only the superintendent, George W. Tipton, was authorized to punish workers, and by all accounts he was a fair man — never subsequently accused of capricious justice. He also held eleven white subordinates in check, reportedly forbidding them even to curse the men. Then on September 4, when Tipton died of some unreported malady and was replaced by Dr. Charles D. Smith, conditions abruptly changed. ...

With Smith as superintendent, discipline disintegrated. Alcohol, absolutely forbidden by the company (and a prohibition rigorously enforced by Tipton) quickly appeared. ... Whites later claimed that blacks became sullen and less cooperative, supposedly because of moonshine as well as mounting debts at the company store. Blacks said whites (including Smith) became increasingly abusive, routinely cursing them.

THE NAVASSA UPRISING OF SEPTEMBER 1889 AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The situation worsened Sept. 12 after a white supervisor named James Mahon "triced up" (suspended off the ground by ropes tied to the wrists) a black worker named Smallwood, just out of the hospital. On Sept. 14 a drunk supervisor named Charles Wesley Roby, armed with a pistol, cursed Edmund Francis, a black worker, for being late, and told him to dig or "The next grave I measure out will be yours."

Francis struck Roby with a steel bar, knocking him unconscious. Roby's pistol vanished. In the ensuing battle, armed whites were unable to save the



Figure 19. This July 2, 1943, Navy 49 cover probably originated at Navassa Island, but conclusive proof has not yet been found. The 6¢ Twin-Engine Transport airmail stamp (Scott C25) paid the military concessionary airmail letter rate.



Figure 20. In 1944 the Navy provided frequent mail service to and from the Coast Guard station at Navassa Island by air, dropped from and pulled up to a K class U.S. Navy blimp. In this picture, a K class blimp escorts a convoy of merchant ships to provide protection from attacks by German submarines. U.S. Navy photo courtesy of the National Archives.

most despised supervisors. Thus began a rebellion of black workers that began at approximately 8 a.m. and continued until evening, with sporadic violent encounters throughout the day. By the time the battle ended, four whites lay dead, including Mahon, the cruel supervisor, and Foster, the man who had sent his mother the Figure 11 cover. A fifth would die several days later.

Both sides withdrew; blacks to their barracks, whites to the superintendent's house, as an uneasy calm took hold. Skaggs wrote: "Significantly, no one apparently suggested that the only way they [the blacks] might escape justice would be to murder the surviving whites who surely would talk if permitted to live. Neither was the company store looted, even though — under the circumstances — none of the whites was in a position to prevent it."

A British warship arrived Sept. 20 to maintain order until a U.S. vessel could be sent. The black workers were shipped back to Baltimore and charged with crimes ranging from rioting to murder. Two African-American organizations, the Brotherhood of Liberty and the Order of Galilean Fishermen, hired a legal team of three black and three white lawyers to defend them.

Five trials were held in the U.S. Circuit Court. Three defendants were convicted of murder and were sentenced to hang. Of 14 convicted of manslaughter, eight were sentenced to 10 years in prison at hard labor, four to five years, and two to two years, in a New York penitentiary. For the 23

convicted of rioting, prison terms ranged from six months to two years in the Maryland House of Correction.

The executions were stayed pending an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court styled *Jones v. U.S.* The appellant Henry Jones admitted he had killed Foster. His legal defense challenged the constitutionality of the Guano Act, the authority of the U.S. government over Navassa, and the jurisdiction of the American court. Among the issues was Haiti's claim to the island. The court rejected those arguments and affirmed the conviction.

In language that has freighted international relations ever since, the court declared on Nov. 24, 1890:

... if the executive, in his correspondence with the government of Hayti, has denied the jurisdiction which it claimed over Navassa, the fact must be taken and acted on by this court as thus asserted and maintained; it is not material to inquire, nor is it the province of the court to determine, whether the executive be right or wrong; it is enough to know that in the exercise of his constitutional functions he has decided the question.

Supporters of the defendants mounted a petition campaign, organized by the Brotherhood of Liberty in Baltimore but circulated nationally, "among white, as well as among Negro citizens," according to Henry J. McGuinn in the April 1939 *Journal of Negro History*, that urged President Benjamin Harrison to grant them executive clemency.

Harrison responded favorably. Citing the inhumane conditions imposed on Navassa workers, he wrote, "They were

American citizens, under contracts to perform labor, upon specified terms, within American territory, removed from any opportunity to appeal to any court, or public officer, for redress of any injury, or the enforcement of any civil right." He commuted the sentences to life imprisonment.

MAIL RELAYED VIA NAVASSA

The system of expedited transport in which mail was handed off by one ship and collected by another at a location with no post office, no official representative of a sovereign government, and no wharf where ocean liners could dock, strikes me as outlandish — a throwback to Moby-Dick-era whaling ship crews' use of mail drops on uninhabited islands in the South Seas, but adapted to the era of transoceanic steam navigation. Yet it seems to have performed reliably and efficiently at Navassa from the mid-1870s until 1898.

The Figure 13 cover is a magnificent showpiece to demonstrate how the relay operated. Posted Aug. 26, 1891, at Jacmel, Haiti, it was endorsed for transport to Noumea, New Caledonia, departing on the Atlas Line steamship *Andes*, "via Navassa — New York — San Francisco."

Those instructions were obeyed exactly, as the postmarks verify. The *Andes* left the letter at Navassa en route to Kingston, Jamaica, eventually arriving at New York Sept. 8. But the New York transit backstamp shows that the cover was collected at Navassa by the northbound Atlas Line steamer *Adirondack*, en route from Port au Prince, which arrived at New York on Sept. 6, 10 days in transit from Haiti to New York City.

The letter was presented to the purser of the *Andes* in port at Jacmel, which therefore required Haitian postage. Not having yet passed through a post office, the stamps were not canceled until they were struck with New York foreign mail postmarks. From New York the letter crossed the United States by train, reaching San Francisco on Sept. 12.

From San Francisco it probably was sent onward aboard the steamer *Mariposa*, which departed Sept. 18, reached

Continued on page 58



Figure 21. Aerographer's Mate 3rd Class J.C. Kennedy Jr., the U.S. Navy man who sent this April 10, 1943, cover, was a member of ZP Squadron 51, the unit that flew blimps to and from Navassa Island. The 6c Twin-Engine Transport airmail stamp (Scott C25) paid the military concessionary airmail letter rate.

Continued from page 57

Auckland, New Zealand, Oct. 9, and arrived at Sydney, Australia, Oct. 14. The steamer *Birksgate* departed Sydney Oct. 15, and took about 10 or 11 days to reach Noumea.

The sender, J.B. Vital, had immigrated to Haiti from France in the 1860s. In the 1880s he opened what became one of the largest and most successful businesses in Jacmel, exporting Haitian coffee, cacao and other agricultural staples and importing manufactured goods.

Gallagher bought this cover at a November 1987 David Feldman auction sale, obviously because of the "via Navassa" route endorsement, but his exhibit description shows that he had not discovered how the relay system worked. The cover's postal history significance is greater than he realized, but I'm fortunate that he took note of it and entered the winning bid.

Less exotic examples from Haiti exist, though I don't yet have one. Siegel's 1993 *Rarities of the World* sale included an Atlas Line ship cover from Haiti to New York via Navassa with an Aug. 1, 1898, port of entry postmark of Chester, Pa. Not illustrated in the sale catalog, it went unsold. That might have been the last letter re-



Figure 22. This July 28, 1944, cover originated from U.S. Navy Headquarters Squadron Five, which serviced and directed Caribbean area blimp units, including ZP Squadron 51, which provided mail service for the Coast Guard station at Navassa Island. The 6c Monoplane embossed stamped envelope (Scott UC6) paid the military concessionary airmail letter rate.

layed via Navassa.

The Spanish-American War brought an end to guano mining. Evacuation left the island once again uninhabited, with no one to hold the mail for the next northbound Atlas Line steamer to collect.

The timing was a barely registered irony of Navassa history. In 1896 American filibusters, conspiring illegally, transferred arms, ammunition and supplies for Cuban insurgents from the steamer *Laurada* out of Philadelphia to the tug *Dauntless* at Navassa. Once the United States was militarily engaged in common cause with Cuban patriots, Navassa played no part in the war.

Skaggs wrote: "No [guano] shipment from American appurtenances officially passed through any U.S. port after 1898. ... Navassa, still an American possession despite ongoing Haitian claims to the contrary,

was mined longer and more extensively than any other island, rock, or key that ever appertained to the United States."

NAVASSA ISLAND IN THE 20TH CENTURY

By the turn of the century, Americans had abandoned the island to Haitian fishermen and to nature. From zealous exploitation of the island's resources in prior decades, exemplified by the 1880s Navassa Guano Co. advertising card in Figure 14, only the company's name reminded anyone of its origin, exemplified by the Figure 15 cover from 1914.

But a new purpose returned Navassa to importance. Opening the Panama Canal substantially increased maritime traffic through the Windward Passage. Some naval authorities feared that in stormy weather Navassa would become a dangerous hazard to navigation. In

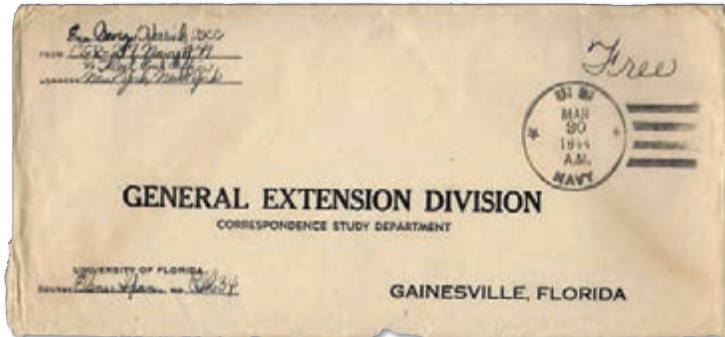


Figure 23. Of these two Navy 49 covers from Ensign George Herrick at Navassa, it's possible but unlikely that the March 22, 1944, letter was collected by the Navy's monthly supply ship that arrived March 28, but that ship had returned to Guantanamo before the March 30 letter was mailed, so that one must have been collected by one of the twice-weekly blimp flights that delivered and collected Navassa mail. Postage was free for surface letters sent by members of the armed forces on active duty, ironic in this instance, because at least one and probably both covers were flown aboard a Navy blimp for part of their conveyance.

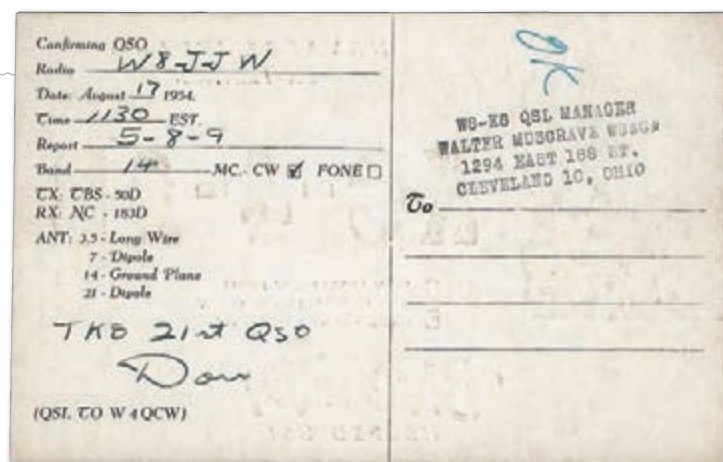


Figure 24. The president of the Bacardi spirits firm, at that time a resident of Cuba, facilitated the first amateur radio DXpedition to Navassa Island. This Aug. 18, 1954, QSL card is a souvenir of that event. There was no way to mail cards at Navassa, so they were included in batch mailings to the hobbyists' contacts after they had returned from the island.

1913 Congress authorized construction of a lighthouse on the island.

On Jan. 17, 1916, shortly before construction began, President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed "that the said Island of Navassa in the West Indies be and the same is reserved for lighthouse purposes." Perhaps wary of a protest from Haiti, his preamble declared that "the Island of Navassa is now under the exclusive jurisdiction of the United States and out of the jurisdiction of any other government."

In the Winter 1988 issue of *The Keeper's Log*, Neil Hurley of the Coast Guard narrated its history. He wrote:

Navassa was a peaceful ghost town until 1915. In that year the Panama Canal opened and lighthouses were needed to guide shipping to the new waterway. One of those new lighthouses was Navassa. George B. Putnam, Commissioner of the Bureau of Lighthouses, called the Navassa Island Lighthouse the "first signal" for the Panama Canal and said it "was the most important lighthouse built by the United States in the last quarter of a century. ...

Because only a small schooner was available for logistics it took 21 months to complete the station. At 162 feet the completed tower was the tallest reinforced concrete tower built to that date. The walls at the base of the tower are six feet thick. A reinforced concrete house for the keeper was built alongside the tower. The 2nd Order Fresnel lens, placed in operation October 21, 1917, had a focal plane 395 feet above the water and the exceptionally clear air of that part of the Caribbean enabled the light to be seen at 29 miles.

Things, predictably, got off to a rocky start on Navassa. During the first year the supply schooner was damaged in a storm and supplies ran out. The keepers sustained themselves on wild goat, pigeons and fish until they were resupplied.

Figure 16 shows the supply schooner at Lulu Bay in 1916.

Figure 17 shows the lighthouse as it neared completion in 1918. It became operational Oct. 21, 1917, still braced by scaffolding. By then America had gone to war. The Navy's Plan A for Control of Overseas Shipping, Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean, classified VERY SECRET, included a patrol of the pass between Jamaica and Navassa Island.

After World War I ended, having deemed that vicinity a location vulnerable to attack on shipping, the Navy established a radio station at Navassa, and conducted submarine exercises between Morant Point, Jamaica, and Navassa. But the Coast Guard had trouble finding qualified lighthouse

keepers willing to remain at the station.

In April 1928, Russell Dunaja read a notice on the bulletin board at the post office in San Juan, Puerto Rico, that announced job openings for lighthouse keeper and radio operator at Navassa Island. He applied for the job, passed the test, and was hired. In a December 1969 *QST* magazine article, he told his story.

"I had to keep light watch every third night and this gave me plenty of time to operate [radio communications with hobbyists]." Figure 18 shows a rare QSL card he sent to Baltimore, postmarked April 4, 1929, U.S. Naval Sta., Guantanamo Bay. "We received our mail every three months when the supply boat arrived," he wrote. A QSL card is written confirmation of reception, usually a postcard sent by one amateur radio station operator to another.

Dunaja and his co-workers were the last Navassa lighthouse keepers. In 1929 the lighthouse was automated, powered by acetylene until 1961, and by electricity since then.

NAVASSA ISLAND BLIMP MAIL IN WORLD WAR II

During World War II, as a component of the defense against the danger to Allied shipping posed by German submarines in the Windward Passage, the Coast Guard stationed a reconnaissance unit on Navassa Island, along with the rescue launch CGR-217 of the Santo Domingo squadron and its crew.

Collecting covers to or from those men is a challenge, both because they are scarce and because they are not

Continued on page 60



Figure 25. In the 1960s the Navassa lighthouse was maintained by monthly visits from the Coast Guard cutter *Hollyhock*, which included the location in the ship cancel on this June 24, 1969, cover. Radio amateurs were there at the same time, unintentionally burdening the Coast Guard crew's duties. The 6¢ Historic Flag of Rhode Island stamp paid the domestic surface letter rate of postage.

Continued from page 59

easy to identify. At first the Navy assigned provisional numbered addresses to a large variety of shore-based post offices, including those at Coast Guard offices. In early 1943 the Navy dedicated a block of numbers in the 11000s to Coast Guard post offices.

Under the initial scheme, Navy 49 was assigned to the Coast Guard district office in San Juan, plus Navassa Island. Effective June 15, 1943, branch number 11046 became the post office address for the Coast Guard base at San Juan. In 1979 or 1980 researcher Vernon Ardiffe reported that the Navy 49 address was assigned to Navassa in June or July 1943, which is congruent with the 11046 assignment to San Juan.

At that time Ardiffe was the only Navassa Island collector and researcher I knew, but he died soon afterward without sending copies of his evidence. Trusting that his sources were reliable, I think the Figure 19 cover seems to have originated at Navassa. The mimeographed return address label supports the impression that it had been recently assigned.

Among the Navy's other anti-submarine efforts was the use of K class blimps to patrol sea lanes and to escort convoys, as pictured in Figure 20. ZP Squadron 51, represented by the Figure 21 cover, was the one that patrolled the Windward Passage area of the Caribbean. (ZP was the designation for units that flew lighter-than-air airships.) Headquarters Squadron Five, represented by the Figure 22 cover, was its base unit.

I am especially gratified to have found these covers because *Linn's* postal history columnist Graham, who collected WWII covers comprehensively and began his collection during the war, wrote in his Aug. 12, 1996, column about blimp mail, "Most of the blimp squadrons were located in the Caribbean and South Atlantic, but I have seen no covers from those units."

Airship Squadron 51, Detachment 1, was established March 5, 1943, at Guantanamo Bay. Its primary assignment

was anti-submarine warfare. The declassified history of the squadron includes the story of its mail service to Navassa:

The Detachment had, during the latter part of December [1943], voluntarily taken on the task of delivering mail to the Coast Guard unit stationed on the island of NAVASSA, situated between Haiti and Jamaica. Because of the lack of dock facilities around the island, provision ships put in with supplies at this isolated Base only once a month, bringing with them mail and other small luxuries to the lonely guardsmen. The blimps provided the solution to the all-important problem of mail by making at least two trips a week to this tiny island, and delivering the mail. The mail sacks were lowered from the ship as it flew slowly, at a low altitude, over the one small clearing in front of the Navassa Lighthouse. Eager hands would quickly untie the sacks; and when the ship came around on another approach with the line down, outgoing bags were sent on. If nothing else can be said in praise of all the operations ever performed by the Det-1 ships, the act of delivering mail to and from these Coast Guardsmen on the lonely island of Navassa would be sufficient to warrant the applause of all.

The last ZP Squadron 51 airship departed Guantanamo on Nov. 29, 1944. The unit was decommissioned Dec. 20. So one can search for Navassa blimp

mail collected or delivered between late December 1943 and late November 1944, a period of 11 months.

In the December 1987 *Airpost Journal*, Max Kronheim published a letter from Adm. Charles E. Rosendahl, the Navy's leading advocate of lighter-than-air aviation during the war. Rosendahl briefly alluded to the Navassa Island mail service. He wrote, "It is doubtful that there are any airship-carried covers available or identifiable since there were no special markings thereon."

I beg to differ. Declassified Navy war diaries report individual flight activities, submarine sightings, measures taken, and any information that might be of use to superior officers. I have a few that are pertinent. A Feb. 22, 1944, Detachment 1 report says, "K-30 ... picked up mail from Navassa Island." A May 5 report says, "Mail was dropped and picked up at Coast Guard Station on Navassa Island."

So far those are the only examples I have received from the National Archives that give dates of mail flights, but if I were able to find a Navy 49 cover matching one of those dates, who could doubt that it would have flown on a Navy blimp?

Here's a different method: We know that the Navassa Guardsmen were supplied by ship only once a month. The March 27, 1944, Navy war diary for Guantanamo states, "CG MADRONA departed 2220Q, for Navassa Island." The March 29 diary states, "MADRONA arrived from Navassa 0100Q."

Now consider the two Navy 49 covers in Figure 23. Conceivably the cover canceled March 22 might have been awaiting pickup when Madrona arrived six days later, but it is not plausible that the March 30 cover languished for four weeks until a supply ship re-

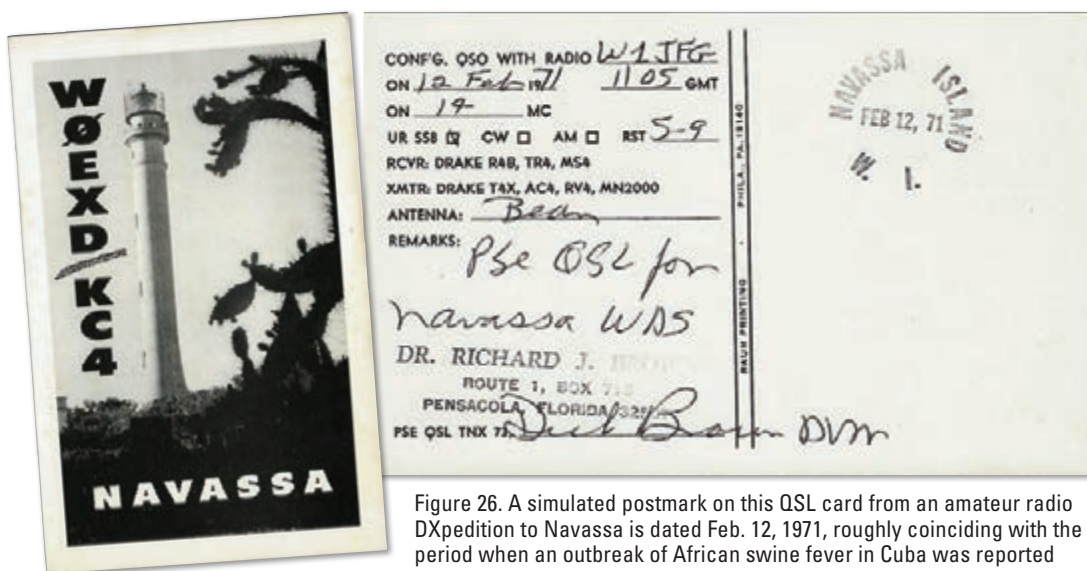


Figure 26. A simulated postmark on this QSL card from an amateur radio DXpedition to Navassa is dated Feb. 12, 1971, roughly coinciding with the period when an outbreak of African swine fever in Cuba was reported to have been smuggled in from Navassa Island by anti-Castro agents working in league with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

turned. It must be considered a blimp cover. Probably both were flown. I have not seen a cover addressed to Navy 49, but I would welcome a report of one.

NAVASSA AND ITS 'APPURTENANCE' APPARITION AFTER WORLD WAR II

To the best of my knowledge, the end of the war restored Navassa to its Wilsonian status as a lighthouse reserve, periodically serviced by a Coast Guard ship and visited by Haitian trespassers who paid no heed to the American Guano Act. The unequal struggle between Haiti and the United States over that small, lonely outpost is a large part of its appeal. But the heritage of the Guano Act and the Jones v. U.S. Supreme Court precedent continued to creep.

Barely had the ink dried on the Japanese surrender instrument than President Harry S. Truman, on Sept. 28, 1945, proclaimed that "the Government of the United States regards the natural resources of the subsoil sea bed of the continental shelf beneath the high seas but contiguous to the coasts of the United States as appertaining to the United States, subject to its jurisdiction and control."

As if to wring as much international mischief as possible from Truman's proclamation, the April 1947 issue of *Nation's Business* magazine published an article titled "A Legal Key to Davy Jones' Locker" with the teaser subhead "A forgotten murder provides a background for our announced right to seek oil in the Gulf of Mexico."

Herbert Corey, the author, disparaged Haitians: "They were a backward people and could only understand plain meanings. The significance of the word 'appertaining' escaped them."

Navassa as a metaphor for

the unrestricted exercise of extraterritorial power appears to have overtaken the significance of the actual island, at least for that moment.

Collectors of Navassa Island postal history who try to include the nearly 75-year period since the war ended must settle for thin postal prospects, or for quasi-postal collectibles and other paper ephemera related to the island, such as QSL cards from radio amateurs who visited Navassa but could not send cards to their contacts until after they had returned home.

Nevertheless, some of those items can enhance one's collection both visually and educationally. Furthermore, it would probably be good discipline for our hobby to recognize postal history counterparts to space-filler stamps, resting in those album spaces to keep the progression clear while we continue to search for more attractive replacements.

The first amateur radio DX-pedition to Navassa occurred in August 1954 when Jose Bosch Lamarque, president of the Bacardi rum enterprise, offered to transport three American teenagers to the island in his 50-foot yacht *Hatuey*. QSL cards that they sent to fellow radio amateurs who had chatted with them on shortwave bands credited their host's business. Figure 24 shows one.

HAITIAN HOPES RAISED AND DASHED

On June 27, 1956, 100 years after the adoption of the Guano Act, U.S. Rep. William L. Dawson of Illinois introduced in the House of Representatives "A bill to disclaim any rights of the United States to the island of Navassa," which was referred to the Committee on Foreign Affairs. The bill stood no chance of being reported out, but some African-American community newspapers



Figure 27. The original caption for this Oct 23, 1971, AP wirephoto of Plum Island reads: "ISLAND OF VIRULENT ANIMAL DISEASES — This is a view of Plum Island, bottom of photo, site of the U.S. Department of Agriculture laboratory for infectious animal diseases. At top of photo is Orient Point two miles away separated by the waters of Plum Gut channel. Long Island's north shore stretches from Orient Point westward."

published reports that described it as a shoo-in, probably with Dawson's encouragement.

Intellectuals in Haiti seized the opportunity to reprise their country's claim to Navassa. The cultural journal *Optique* devoted 28 pages of the August 1956 issue to the subject. An unsigned introductory article reviewed the history of the dispute, summarized Haiti's legal position, and cited American attitudes both pro and con.

Representing the "ugly American" position were insulting and racially disparaging passages from the 1947 *Nation's Business* article as evidence that "The American arguments therefore amount to an arbitrary act by Congress supported by American military power." Representing the positive side were "thousands of voters who stood up to erase all trace of the centuries-old injustice perpetrated against a weak people."

The second article was a complete translation into French of Herbert Corey's *Nation's Business* article, leaving readers no doubt that the editorial excerpts had not exaggerated the author's contempt for Haiti, nor his opinion that the guano claim ought to be viewed as a guide to claiming and exploiting natural resources under the sea.

The third and longest article, by an eminent journalist, lawyer and scholar named Ernst Trouillot, narrated Soulouque's diplomacy and the historical background that supported his perspective, which I summarized earlier. "Legally and historically," he wrote, "Navassa is as much in Haiti as the island of Nantucket is in the United States."

Dawson's bill was the subject of discussion, praise and pride among African-Americans, and the Eisenhower administration really had no intention of opening the case for reconsideration. The Haitian writers correctly understood both sides, and which of them had the upper hand.

MORE RECENT COLLECTIBLE SOUVENIRS OF NAVASSA

In the 1960s the crew of Coast Guard cutter *Hollyhock* periodically performed maintenance on the Navassa lighthouse. Being a ship with a post office, its postmarks are collectible. Figure 25 shows a June 24, 1969, USCGS

Continued on page 62

Figure 28. A 1972 QSL card represents the first DXpedition to Navassa after the anti-Cuba intrigue was said to have been conducted on the island and after news media had published information about Plum Island.



Continued from page 61

Hollyhock cover canceled during one of those calls, with NAVASSA ISLAND, W.I. inscription in the postmark.

By coincidence that visit coincided with a radio amateur DXpedition to Navassa, which was the subject of an article titled "Navassa Revisited" in the December 1969 issue of *QST* magazine. The radio tourists had reached the island by chartering a Jamaican fishing boat named *Miss Jekyll*. After the lighthouse chores were completed, *Hollyhock* had departed, but reappeared one day later after someone had reported suspicious activity.

The radio author wrote, "Without our knowledge several of the Jamaicans had captured some goats and taken them aboard the *Miss Jekyll*," to the shame of their hobby passengers. "The Jamaicans were required to give up their hard-earned prize. We felt sorry for the poor Jamaicans and we were also concerned that this incident might mar the excellent amateur-Coast Guard relations."

CLANDESTINE ATTACK ON CUBA FROM NAVASSA ISLAND

"Cuban Outbreak of Swine Fever Linked to CIA" headlined a Jan. 9, 1977, article by Drew Featherston and John Cummings in *Newsday*, a Long Island, New York, daily paper. The article began:

With at least the tacit backing of U.S. Central Intelligence Agency officials, operatives linked to anti-Castro terrorists introduced African swine fever virus into Cuba in 1971. Six weeks later an outbreak of the disease forced the slaughter of 500,000 pigs to prevent a nationwide animal epidemic.

A U.S. intelligence source told *Newsday* he was given the virus in a sealed, unmarked container at a U.S. Army base and CIA training ground in the Panama Canal Zone, with instructions to turn it over to the anti-Castro group.

The 1971 outbreak, the first and only time the disease has hit the Western Hemisphere, was labeled the "most alarming event" of 1971 by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization. ...

Another man involved in the operation, a Cuban exile who asked not to be identified, said he was on the trawler where the virus was put aboard at a rendezvous point off Bocas del Toro, Panama. He said the trawler carried the virus to Navassa Island, a tiny, deserted, U.S.-owned island between Jamaica and Haiti. From there, after the trawler made a brief stopover, the container was taken to Cuba and given to other operatives on the southern coast near the U.S. Navy base at Guantanamo Bay in late March, according to the source on the trawler.

It was an explosive story that was reprinted in newspapers across the country. The CIA officially denied it six days later, in response to a request from the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, but the *Newsday* re-

porters had cited so many corroborating sources, with such specific details, that the denial was not widely believed.

My own Navassa research file includes a previously unreported document that lends circumstantial support to the *Newsday* story — a type-script draft of Coast Guard lighthouse historian Hurley's article. A brief passage that does not appear in *The Keeper's Log* published version says: "In 1971, a U.S. Navy Research team visited the Island to look for animal diseases that could be transmitted to man. They found one bird carrying malaria."

It might be a coincidence, but it seems remarkable that the Navy was investigating the possible presence of biological toxins at about the time that agents were reported to have brought dangerous microbes to Navassa for a biological attack on Cuba.

The biggest reason for trusting the credibility of the *Newsday* report was that the only place in the Western Hemisphere where the virus was known to have been kept before the outbreak in Cuba was at the secret Plum Island laboratory off the eastern tip of Long Island, where local *Newsday* reporters had been cultivating sources since the one and only time reporters had been allowed inside in October 1971.

The *Newsday* article made no mention of Plum Island, perhaps to protect its report-

ers' sources, but other reporters quickly made the connection. In the 2004 book about Plum Island, *Lab 257* by Michael Christopher Carroll, the author wrote:

According to the federal government, Plum Island is the only location in the United States where African swine fever virus is permitted. No one will say on the record that the virus for the Cuban mission was prepared on Plum Island and sent to Fort Gulick. However, given the frequent traffic between Plum Island and Fort Detrick, samples — with or without the USDA's knowledge of the ultimate purpose — could have been sent to Fort Detrick for transshipment to Fort Gulick.

Regardless of whether or not the full story will ever become public, I wanted to find a way to include this episode as part of my collection of postal history and paper ephemera of Navassa. The best I have been able to assemble is the sequence in Figures 26 (a QSL card with simulated Feb. 12, 1971, postmark, from the DXpedition nearest to the date of the secret mission), 27 (an original Associated Press aerial wirephoto of the secret laboratory at Plum Island, distributed in 1971 on the only occasion when reporters were allowed inside), and 28 (a May 1972 QSL card from the DXpedition that next allowed civilians to land on Navassa after the Plum Island "open house").

Those would not satisfy an orthodox postal historian, but they are my space fillers.

Continued on page 64

Continued from page 62

THE 1981 NAVASSA DXPEDITION FROM HAITI

The Figure 29 QSL card is a splendid souvenir of Haitian radio amateurs' demonstration on behalf of their government's claim to Navassa. In the spring of 1981, members of the Radio Club D'Haiti asked their government to designate a call sign and to provide them transport to the island. In July they were issued the call sign HHON and flown across by helicopter.

Upon arrival they raised the Haitian flag and sang their national anthem. When an American military officer asked to see their authorization to land, they answered, "We need no permit to travel in our country." The officer mellowed and welcomed the Haitians to camp. When they went on air that evening, they were instantly overwhelmed with contacts, working more than 7,000 during their seven-day stay. They returned the way they had come.

The petulant American Radio Relay League refused to recognize that DXpedition. To me that's a shame. Recalling the citizen-to-citizen ping-pong diplomacy in the 1970s that broke

down diplomatic barriers that used to prevent official relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China, it seems to me that radio hobbyists on both sides of this 160-year divide are the people in both countries most familiar with the history, most interested in free travel to the island, and most skilled in international communication. They ought to give it a try.

NAVASSA IN FICTION

In Dan Fesperman's 2006 novel *The Prisoner of Guantanamo*, the climactic made-for-Hollywood chase scene occurs when the protagonist Revere Falk, a Cuban spy, escaped from Guantanamo by stealing a Navy speedboat and raced to Navassa Island. There he swapped the sleek power craft for a Haitian's battered fishing boat, meandered on to Jamaica, successfully evaded his pursuers, and got away.

During his Marine days a Coast Guard ensign had told him about the island, because the Coast Guard had then maintained a lighthouse there. ...

Seven years ago the Coast Guard had closed the lighthouse. Nowadays the only official American visitors were biological survey



Figure 29. For seven days in July 1981, members of the Radio Club D'Haiti, pictured here on their QSL card, camped at Navassa and communicated with more than 7,000 fellow radio amateur hobbyists around the world. They arrived and departed by helicopter.

teams from the Department of the Interior. The island's more common visitors were Haitian fishermen, who often camped there overnight, especially when they needed to ride out an approaching storm.

Fiction, perhaps, but that's the honest truth.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My research has benefited from access to extensive files on Navassa Island compiled from the 1930s to the 1990s, in succession, by Vernon Ardiffe, Scott and Shirley Gallagher, and Jon Krupnick, pioneer collectors of Navassa Island postal history. Standing on the shoulders of giants, to borrow Isaac Newton's metaphor and apply it to my philatelic project, with the added advantage of global online resources unknown to earlier generations, I have collated, broadened, deepened and, I hope, sharpened their reports. Even so, postal historians of the Caribbean area surely can further supplement and correct mine.

In addition to those credits, I am grateful that John Barwis, Micah Connor (of the Maryland Historical Society), Richard Frajola, Kim McKeithan and Chris Killillay (of the National Archives), Ellen Peachey, Scott Trepel and Kathleen Wunderly also assisted me. None of them are to blame for my opinions or for my mistakes. ☐